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St Benedict 2022

(Letter n° 64)

“Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple,
they broke bread at home
and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.”
(Ac 2:46)

A community event that deserves a special place in this letter is the solemn profession of Bro. Laurent M Salud Abila. On the 25th March, the solemnity of the Annunciation, Bro. Laurent made his life commitment in the community in Rostrevor. Bro. Laurent was born in the Philippines; his immediate family are divided between the Philippines and the United States; he also has cousins in Dublin. He has both Philippines and American nationality.

Because of the pandemic his family could not come to Rostrevor for his profession. However he was surrounded by many friends of the community: Abbot James Liprie, former Superior of our Monastery in Louisiana (now resident at Monte Oliveto Maggiore), Mgr John McAreavey, former Bishop of our diocese, and Passionist Fr Tom Scanlon (Crossgar) concelebrated with the community.



On 30 August 2021, Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, wrote a letter to monastic religious in preparation for the synod on synodality. We invite you to read the text:

Dear brothers and sisters called to the monastic and contemplative life.

On the threshold of this decisive step for the Church of our time. I turn to you, dear brothers and sisters, with your precious vocation that enriches the entire ecclesial community, because you are custodians and witnesses of a fundamental reality for the synodal process that our Holy Father invites us to realize. I am convinced that there are three words, central to monastic and contemplative life, which you safeguard in the Church's life in your sharing with sisters and brothers: listening, conversion, communion.

Above all, "listening". In the above cited discourse, the Holy Father affirms that "A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening 'is more than simply hearing'." The experience of listening has always been central to monastic and contemplative life, so much so that often monastic rules from different traditions are collections of Biblical and Gospel expressions, affirming that monastic and contemplative life is an "incarnation" of the Word of God that has been listened to, meditated upon, and interiorized. In this regard, we cannot fail to cite the beginning of the Rule of St. Benedict, the father of western monasticism: "Listen carefully, my son!" (RB, Prologue, 1). This invitation to listen permeates your entire life, from your listening to the Word of God in the Sacred Scriptures all the way to your listening to your brothers and sisters in community as well as to the men and women of our time. To listen, precisely because it is more than physical hearing, is to learn. Your life is a gymnasium in which diligent listening to the Scriptures, "as a baby sucks milk from his mother's breast" (Ephrem the Syrian), educates one in a profound listening to oneself, others, and God. The hospitality, so common in monastic and contemplative communities, is itself an experience of

welcome and of listening and has its source in your frequenting the Scriptures, in *lectio divina*, and in other spiritual approaches to the Word of God.

The second word that characterizes your life, and which I should like to emphasize, is "conversion". Once again, in the same address, the Holy Father affirms that "Journeying together — laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome — is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice". A true synodal journey cannot disregard our willingness to be converted by our listening to the Word of God and by the Holy Spirit present in our lives. Monastic and contemplative life reminds the Church that the invitation to conversion is at the heart of the proclamation made by Jesus, who travelled through the villages of Galilee saying: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4.17). Baptism, the fundamental vocation for all of the Lord's disciples, is the first conversion worked by the Holy Spirit within our hearts; at the same time, the entirety of Christian life must remain open to a journey of conversion to God and his Word. Even from a purely human point of view, we know that true listening also requires reciprocal conversion that invites us to leave our securities behind so that we might enter the difficult but indispensable terrain of dialogue. In your experience of community life, in which synodality must surely be a fundamental element, you know both the "beauty" of walking together as well as the inevitable difficulties and possible wounds. For this reason, and for the synodal process our Holy Father has suggested to the universal Church, you are "experts" of this dignity of conversion in its positive aspects as well as in its difficulties; difficulties that should not discourage but rather should be lived in a true spirit of faith and hope.

The third word of which you are custodians for everyone is "communion". The Pope insists on this dimension even in reference to his own service as the Bishop of Rome. He affirms: "The fact that the Synod always acts *cum Petro et sub Petro* — indeed, not only *cum Petro*, but also *sub Petro* — is not a limitation of freedom, but a guarantee of unity" (Address of His Holiness Pope Francis commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015). Your life also gives witness to this: the goal of listening and conversion is communion. In your communities you well know that communion is the ultimate criterion for discernment by which the synodal journey is verified. We call to mind the story of the two Emmaus wayfarers who were approached by the Lord on the way, their disappointment and disillusionment (cf. Lk 24. 13-35). The Lukan episode ends with a scene of "ecclesial verification" that signals the point of the story: "So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, 'The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!'" (Lk 24.33-34). Ecclesial communion is discernment's true seal, confirming the synodal journey. You, with your communitarian life, testify to the truthfulness of this affirmation that we harvest from the Emmaus story. In fact, in community life, in religious life, you experience how much communion (which is not the same as uniformity) is effectively the verifying criterion of an authentic, shared journey in faith.

But the reason moving me to write to you at this time that is so close to the opening of the synodal process in October, touches on another word that belongs to the deepest chords of your vocation: "prayer". This term is profoundly linked to the other three terms that we have just examined. Our Holy Father Pope Francis often repeats: "pray for me!". Today I, as interpreter of the meaning that the Pope wants to give to the synodal path, ask you: "pray for the Synod!". If the synodal path is not, above all, an ecclesial journey of love to the Father through Christ in the Spirit, it will surely not bear the hoped for fruit. Prayer is the dynamic encounter of love in the Trinitarian God, in the pluriform unity that urges us on to be living witnesses of this love. Regarding evangelization, in *Evangelii gaudium* our Holy Father Pope Francis recommends that we be "firmly rooted in prayer, for without prayer all our activity risks being fruitless and our message empty" (EG, 259). There is a ministry of praise and prayer of which you are the living sign in the Church. The writer of Psalm 134 invites the Levites and the priests of the Temple in Jerusalem to bless the Lord "day and night", to raise up their hands in incessant prayer. There are persons who, chosen from among the people, have the task of ensuring that the ministry of prayer and praise, day and night, never fails in the temple of the Lord. The priests and the levites do not take the place of the people he serving God, but are a living sign of the continual praise that rises endlessly from the faithful to the Most High, even though they are not

present in the Temple. The Lord says to Moses: "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Ex 19.6). Therefore the entire people has the task of being a "mediator" with God in the midst of all humanity, and of praising him. However, within the people there are some who have the task of expressing and manifesting this dimension that belongs to all of Israel and to its mission in the midst of all the nations. In the light of this text we can intuit the authentic value of the ministry of prayer and praise of which you are custodians by your vocations: you have the task within the community of carrying out the ministry of prayer, intercession and blessing. In this phase of the synodal process I do not ask you to pray in the place of other brothers and sisters, but to keep everyone's attention on the spiritual dimension of the journey we are undertaking, to know how to discern the action of God in the life of the universal Church and of each local Church. You are for everyone, as were the Levites and the priests in the Psalm, "ministers of prayer" who, through praise and intercession, remind everyone that without communion with God there can be no communion among ourselves.



✠ Sunday 28 November, we began the season of Advent with the Church of Ireland community in Rostrevor.

✠ 4 December, Bro. Thierry was in Downpatrick to take part in the ordination of Paul McCormick as permanent deacon. Several months ago Paul learnt that he had a cancerous tumour in his brain; his ordination was brought forward. On 6 January Paul died surrounded by his wife and two children. Br Thierry was present for the funeral rites that took place in Downpatrick.

✠ 4-6 January, Bishop Fintan Gavin of Cork and Ross (Ireland), was with us for a retreat.

✠ 10 January, the anniversary of our arrival in Ireland in 1998. The new owners of the former Convent of the missionary Sisters of our Lady of Apostles who accommodated us in our initial years in Rostrevor, welcomed us for a visit of the renovated property. It was a moment for the 4 brothers who have lived there from 1998 to 2004 to recall that period and for the other brothers who have often heard those years spoken of to become acquainted with a place which was so significant in the early years of our Benedictine presence in this area.

✠ 20-30 January, Bro. Vianney O'Donnell from the Cistercian Abbey of Portglenone visited us.

✠ For the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: on 23 January, Rev. Louise Donald, Methodist minister for the Newry area, which includes Warrenpoint and Rostrevor, preached at the Sunday Eucharist; on the same day Bro. Eric preached at the Church of Ireland cathedral in Downpatrick; on 25 January, the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, the preacher was Rev. Darren McCartney, rector of the Church of Ireland parish of Rostrevor.

✠ 25-31 January, Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Dom Andrea Santus, bursar general of our Congregation, are at the Abbey of Bec (Normandy).

✠ In February and March COVID struck the community; one after another we tested positive: Abbot Mark Ephrem (8 February), Bro. Thierry (11 February), Bro. Gregory (14 February), Bro. Joshua (27 February), Bro. David Joseph (1 March), Bro. Eric (2 March), Bro. Laurent (3 March), Bro. Benoit (5 March). We each isolated for ten days in our rooms with our meals served by brothers who had completed their time of isolation or who had not yet done so.

✠ 21-25 March, Abbot Mark-Ephrem was at the Abbey of Monte Oliveto for a meeting of the Definitory.

✠ 9-11 March, Sr Kathy McKee, Little Sister of Jesus, author of a biography of Charles de Foucauld, gave a series of lectures to the community on the life of "Bro. Charles" who was to be canonised by Pope Francis on 15 May 2022.

✠ 23 March, Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh and Apostolic Administrator of our diocese, invites religious of the diocese for a time of reflection on the Synod. About 30 religious participate in the Eucharist celebrated by Archbishop Martin, followed by a discussion with Patricia Maguire, leader of the group in the diocese that is responsible for the Synod.

✠ 28-31 March, Abbot Mark-Ephrem, the Abbot General and Dom Andrew Santus were at the Monastery of Our Lady of Holy Hope (Mesnil-St Loup, France) for the election of a new prior. On 29 March, Fr Guillaume Peyrouche d'Arnaud de Sarazignac, was elected to succeed Fr Bertrand Jeuffrain.

✠ 4-8 April, Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Bro. Thierry are at the Abbey of Maylis.

✠ 14 April, Abbot Mark-Ephrem takes part in the Chrism Mass of the diocese, led by Archbishop Eamon

Martin.

✠ 19 April, Brenda Sloan becomes a secular oblate.

✠ 21-26 April, Bishop Raymond Field, former auxiliary Bishop of Dublin, was with us.

✠ 29 April, Fr Paddy Baker, a priest of the diocese of Derry (N. Ireland), becomes a secular oblate.

✠ 5 May, we learn of the death of Sr Gerard of St Mel, Little Sister of the Poor in Dublin. After spending her whole life in French communities, Sr Gerard returned to Ireland and made her annual retreat with us. On 10 May Abbot Mark presided at her funeral in Dublin.

On 5 May we also celebrated the birthday of Bro. Benoit. A community trip was organised to mark the day. On 9 May we travel to Enniskillen (N. Ireland) where we visit the underground caves at Marble Arch and the castle at Florencecourt.

✠ 18 May, Abbot Mark-Ephrem, Bro. Eric and Bro. Thierry take part in a diocesan meeting at the Conference and Retreat Centre, Dromantine, in the presence of Archbishop Eamon Martin and the Apostolic Nuncio to Ireland, Archbishop Jude Thaddeus Okolo.

✠ 19-27 May, Bro. Eric is in the West of Ireland for a time of retreat and rest.

✠ 26 May, when on retreat with us, Sr Conchita McDonnell, a Missionary Sister of the Holy Rosary, died suddenly with a heart attack. After many years as a missionary in Africa and Brazil, Sr Conchita returned to Ireland twenty years ago; she came on retreat to the Abbey at least twice a year. For a time she was president of the Conference of Religious of Ireland.

✠ 30 May-2 June, Abbot Mark-Ephrem is at the Abbey of Bec with Dom Andrea Santus.

✠ 2 June, Abbot Mark-Ephrem takes his stall as canon in the Church of Ireland Cathedral in Armagh for a service of thanksgiving for the 70 years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

✠ 4-9, Fr Paul Farrelly a Benedictine monk of the Prince of Peace Abbey (USA) is with us.

✠ 5 May, the Feast of Pentecost, the preacher at our Eucharist was Rev Dr Ivan Patterson, former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Along with his wife Maureen, he joined us for a meal and some fraternal time with the community.

✠ 13-18 June, Fr Mark-Ephrem was with our brothers in the Abbey of Maylis (France).

✠ 27-30 June, Fr George Vakkachan Punnathanath, a Benedictine monk of the Congregation of St Sylvester in India, and currently chaplain to the Benedictine nuns in Kylemore Abbey (Ireland) was with us.

✠ 4-7 July, Abbot Mark-Ephrem takes part in a meeting of the Definitory at the Abbey of Monte Oliveto (Italy).



I think there is no saying in the Gospel that made a deeper impression on me
and more transformed my life than this one:

"Whatever you did to one of the least of these you did it to me."

If we remember that these are the words of Uncreated Truth
and come from the same lips that said: "This is my body, this is my Blood,"
how compelling we are moved to seek out Jesus and love him
in the "least ones", the sinners, the poor.

St Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916)